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SUBJECT: Liberian Refugee Update: Ambassador's Meeting with UNHCR
Accra Representative; Re-issuance of USG Policy on Liberians

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On March 20, the Ambassador met with UNHCR Accra Representative Aida Haile Mariam, who provided UNHCR's perspective on the current crisis, including Ghana's efforts to return some Buduburam residents to Liberia. Mariam confirmed that UNHCR is now involved in screening the Liberians, and has tentatively determined that 31 of the detainees are not registered as refugees. At the request of UNHCR and the Interior Minister, and in consultation with PRM, the Embassy has re-issued the USG policy that we are no longer resettling Liberian refugees to the U.S. End Summary.

Background on the Current Crisis

¶2. (SBU) Mariam began by providing background on the current situation. She noted that resettlement of Liberian refugees ended in June 2007; at that time returnees were given USD5. In mid-February UNHCR had offered to provide a financial incentive of \$100 per adult and \$50 per child for Liberian refugees to return to Liberia.

¶3. (SBU) UNHCR personnel has held meetings with camp residents, including several elderly residents who expressed a desire for repatriation. However, a group of vocal and threatening opponents to repatriation emerged. UNHCR held a meeting in Accra with refugee leaders, who initially asked for \$3,000 per person to repatriate to Liberia, and later said they would settle for \$1,000. She said this was not negotiable. She commented that the opposition leaders were initially a small number of women, but that the group evolved to include about 22 people, who are mostly male.

¶4. (SBU) Mariam stressed that while the policy of UNHCR, resettlement has ceased (except for "protection-related issues" such as medical requirements), has been communicated to the refugees, "they do not accept this." She noted that opponents started disrupting programs in the camp such as schools and food distribution. As recently as March 11, in a meeting with UNHCR the refugees were "adamant in their demands," while UNHCR explained the limitations to what they could do.

¶5. (SBU) On March 17 at 6:30 PM, Mariam said that refugees who were protesting on the soccer field were arrested. She noted that most of the people on the field were women, and that force was not used as many of the refugees apparently believed that they would be resettled and were therefore cooperative with the authorities.

Interaction with the Ghanaian Authorities

¶6. (SBU) Mariam said that UNHCR had communicated with the Ghanaian Government the need to follow Ghanaian law and international conventions concerning refugees. She also said she had requested that UNHCR headquarters send a letter to President Kufuor requesting that Ghana follow international law in its treatment of the detained

refugees. Mariam said that while the Ghana Refugee Board (GRB) had counseled the Minister of Interior on the legal requirements, the decision to deport had been made at the Presidential level, which put the GRB in a "very difficult" position. Mariam said she has been encouraging the GRB to "do its job."

¶7. (SBU) Mariam acknowledged that UNHCR had been asked for assistance in transporting the Liberians to Liberia, but had told the GOG it could only do so if repatriations were voluntary.

¶8. (SBU) Regarding the detainees, Mariam said that a number of them were not registered as refugees. UNHCR had verified that about 600 were registered refugees, and was re-verifying to be sure that the remaining 31 were not. If they are not refugees, Mariam said, they would be considered illegal residents of Ghana and could be deported. However, UNHCR would not assist - the deportation would be the GOG's responsibility.

¶9. (SBU) Mariam also commented that it would be helpful if the U.S. re-issued its policy statement for 2008 that it was no longer re-settling Liberian refugees.

Liberia-Ghana Consultations

¶10. (SBU) Mariam also confirmed that a Liberian Government team was scheduled to arrive March 22 to consult with the GOG on a way forward. The team would include the Executive Director of Liberia's Return and Reintegration Commission, and representatives from Liberia's Ministry of Justice and National Security Council.

Re-statement of USG Policy on Liberian Refugees

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¶11. (SBU) Ambassador Bridgewater spoke later on March 20 with Minister of Interior Bartels, who asked the Ambassador to re-issue the U.S. statement that it was no longer resettling Liberian refugees. Following Post consultations with PRM, the Ambassador later made a statement to that effect on BBC radio, and Post issued a press release to the Ghanaian media. We are also providing UNHCR Ghana with the text of the statement to post at Buduburam.

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